



## A whole new game

Tired of racy content, software developers launch a line of Christian-based computer fun

By Jennifer Garza -- Bee Staff Writer

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FREMONT - At Digital Praise, the office computers are secondhand and the storyboards for the latest games are posted on the conference room walls in place of artwork.

But the owners don't seem to mind their modest surroundings, because they're focused on a greater glory - creating computer games that reflect their Christian values.

"We're putting everything into the actual games. We believe this is where God is leading us," says founder Peter Fokos, during a tour of the company.

Visitors see the company motto as they enter the lobby. It reads: "Glorifying God Through Interactive Media."

Digital Praise was started by three Christian men fed up with the graphic violence and sexual images in computer games. They mortgaged their homes to finance their company and, perhaps with a little help from above, created games that are being praised by both the gaming and Christian communities.

The company's two games, released this spring, have religious themes and feature characters from the popular "Adventures in Odyssey" radio program by Focus on the Family, the conservative Christian group headed by Dr. James Dobson.

While Digital Praise officials maintain that their primary focus is spiritual, they're also interested in more earthly rewards - a potentially lucrative market that has mostly been untapped.

They point to the success of Christian-themed books, movies and music as examples. They're betting computer games will be next.

"Ten years ago, people thought, 'Who is going to be interested in Christian pop music?' Now it's a billion-dollar-a-year business," says Bill Bean, who co-founded Digital Praise along with his brother, Tom, and Fokos.

Gaming industry experts say it's a niche waiting to be mined.

"None of the big (software) publishers have anything," says David Cole, president of DFC Intelligence,



Bill Bean, left, Peter Fokos and Tom Bean left the mainstream computer-game industry and began their own company, mortgaging their homes to pay for it.

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which tracks trends in the video and computer game industries. "With all this interest, this is a great time to break out."

In 2004, U.S. sales of computer and video game software were \$7.3 billion, according to the Entertainment Software Association. But complaints have come along with those sales. Negative feedback from parents about the content of some games and the possibility of reaching new consumers has gotten the attention of industry experts.

Last month, Douglas Lowenstein, president of the Electronic Software Association, talked about the religious market in his annual state-of-the-industry speech to gamers. He called the movie "The Passion of The Christ" an example "of the powerful market ... in making games for less-traditional audiences than we're accustomed to."

That's what the folks at Digital Praise hope for. In fact, each of the three men running the company - Fokos and Tom and Bill Bean - took money out of their homes and put it into the company.

Bill Bean says he's not worried about the risk.

"I feel, really all three of us feel, that this is something we are compelled to do. I feel safe," he said.

The idea for Digital Praise came to Fokos after he was laid off from the Learning Co. when it was acquired by another company. He had worked on the Carmen Sandiego and Reader Rabbit games, among others.

Married and the father of a then-7-year-old daughter, Fokos began looking for a job.

"I was a middle-age guy working in an industry of 20-year-olds, looking for a job," he says.

Fokos decided to start his own company after interviewing with companies and realizing that many of the games they were working on conflicted with his Christian values.

Fokos knew the Bean brothers from their Sunday school group and shared his ideas for a Christian computer game company. The three men, active in the Harbor Light in Fremont, prayed about what to do. Soon, the brothers wanted to be a part of it. They pledged to put their faith and family first.

The Bean brothers, like Fokos, are married with kids.

"We've each seen what the long hours can do to families," says Tom Bean. "So we agreed that we would make them our priority and God would provide."

Soon, they negotiated their deal with Focus on the Family. Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family, made headlines a few months ago when he said the cartoon "SpongeBob SquarePants" was part of a "pro-homosexual" campaign.

The organization liked what it saw in Digital Praise and its idea of Christ-centered games.

"It's a good way to get a spiritual message out in a fun way," says Marshal Younger, producer of Adventures in Odyssey Radio for Focus on the Family. "Plus, there's a Christian entertainment market."

But the computer gaming industry is extremely competitive, particularly for new companies. Word of mouth can make or break a game quickly.

"You've got to have a quality game," says Cole, of DFC Intelligence. "People might be interested because of the theme, but word will spread fast if it isn't any good."

So far, the two games from Digital Praise have received positive feedback.

Karla Munger, a reviewer from Just Adventure, which evaluates adventure games, said this: "I'm really not into religion. Nothing of the organized variety, anyway. But I'll tell you what: I thoroughly enjoyed playing these games."

The Adventures in Odyssey games follow the trials of three characters from Focus on the Family. Along the way it teaches virtues. Although the games are not overtly religious, there is an occasional biblical reference.

For now, the games are sold only at Christian bookstores or at [www.digitalpraise.com](http://www.digitalpraise.com).

And no matter what happens, the three behind Digital Praise believe they've been guided by a higher power.

"This whole thing," says Fokos, "has been a miracle."

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Experts say the Digital Praise products, shown in action on screens, are on par with mainstream games. "I thoroughly enjoyed playing these games," said Karla Munger, a game reviewer. **Sacramento Bee/Michael A. Jones**



Digital Praise's two game titles feature characters from the popular "Adventures in Odyssey" radio program by Focus on the Family. **Sacramento Bee/Michael A. Jones**